

## Mosaic School Notes

Studio Arte del Mosaico; Ravenna, Italy; Luciana Notturmi, founder and teacher  
These are from our class held in September, 2008

In addition to Luciana, we were assisted by Brunetta, Daniela, Silvia, Anna, Mannela and Gabrielle (translator, when needed, from Canada). Along the way I met Marco, who handles the school website and most email. Also, Marco De Luca stopped by. Our teachers regard him as Ravenna's best mosaicist- that is quite a compliment.

Luciana has two locations in Ravenna. The first morning, we met at the studio with a storefront window on Via Negri. Luciana greeted us and outlined the work we would do. Gabrielle interpreted when necessary. When Luciana gave an extended talk or lecture, she would speak in Italian and Gabrielle would translate. Otherwise, Luciana would speak to us in English. The two classes, the beginning class and the class in mosaic portraits for returning students, were held in the studio adjoining Luciana's house a short distance from the Via Negri studio.

### **First Meeting:**

In the studio on the first morning were a number of mosaics produced professionally by the studio. Our attention was directed to an assortment of images on paper of fragments from the mosaics of Ravenna. These were all of a size manageable for the one-week workshop- a size not larger than 25 cm x 25 cm (10" x 10").

### **Choosing a project:**

We chose our image of what we would attempt to make. We made two tracings. First, a tracing of the mosaic, outlining each tessera of our mosaic. We used wax paper. Then, we made a reverse of the tracing. This reverse tracing was made in water soluble ink so that it could later be transferred onto our lime base.

Then we moved to the other studio to set up and get to work.

### **Demonstration of setting up the easel and work area:**

There is a board 2 cm (3/4") larger on each side than our lime putty slab. And our lime putty base is larger than our mosaic design by the same amount—2 cm (3/4") on each side. Place the board and lime base on the easel (a short easel made of angled plywood), set on a table top so that you cannot quite reach the design from your chair.

The *martello*, the hammer, has a curved top and two flat pointed ends.

The *tagliolo* (known in the USA as a hardy) resembles a large upturned flat chisel. It is set centered in a tall block of wood, giving it a stable base. To gauge the correct height for your

*tagliolo*: Standing in a relaxed posture, the top of the wood for the *tagliolo* is at fingertip height. Set your chair, and have the *tagliolo* on your right side if you are right-handed, on the left if left-handed.

The smalti or marble is cut by bringing the *martello* down onto the mosaic material, which is held between two fingers and poised on the *tagliolo*.

### **The lime base:**

The lime base has the consistency of a rolled slab of clay or malleable putty, about 2 cm (3/4") thick. The lime base is 2 cm (3/4") larger on each side than the mosaic design. When it is applied to the board, first one slab is applied and pressed down so that it will not slide off. Then a thinner second layer is added.

See notes at the end of this paper on my own attempts at making lime putty.

If lime putty is not available, use a rolled slab of clay, but do not let it dry!

*Sculpey or, in Italy, DAS- may be used carefully.* This hastily scrawled note in my notebook leaves me with a question: What does it refer to? I'm pretty sure that my notes were referring to Sculpey (DAS) as a substitute for the lime base, but I'm not sure. Please email me if you know anything about this.

*2016 Notes:* Sculpey and DAS are both "air dried clays" carried by numerous art and craft suppliers. I have not worked with either of these products as of early 2016.

### **Transferring the design:**

Center and lay the reverse design that was traced in water soluble ink onto the lime. When laying on the reverse tracing of the mosaic, be certain that water-soluble ink is face down (or else you must re-trace). While the paper is on the lime, poke holes through the paper, more holes in the intricate areas, to avoid bubbling resulting from air being trapped. Settle the paper onto the lime surface so that the ink is transferred. Lift the paper straight off.

**Definition: A mosaic is...**An organized surface of lines, not "filled in" spaces.

### **Rules:**

- 1.) There is a subject, and there is a background. The background should not distract from the subject. Make no background mistakes.
- 2.) Sometimes one sees backgrounds of mixed colors: Historically, production difficulties may account for mixed-color backgrounds.

- 3.) Split lines:  Do not arrange randomly; example, .

- 4.) Using smaller tesserae results in less total color. Smaller tesserae = less total color. Blends, where a color appears to lighten, can be done with color, but also with the size of the tesserae. For example: As one leaves more space between tesserae, the effect will be that the color appears to lighten (this effect appears more seamless when viewed from a distance).
- 5.) A contour line outlines the subject, and sometimes duplicate contour lines are used. This serves to emphasize the distinction between subject and background. Thus, the background lines can end properly without being a distraction from the subject.
- 6.) Lines should end with a triangle. Background lines ending at the edge of the subject are a distraction; so, distance end-of-line triangles from the subject.
- 7.) No horizontal tessera on a horizontal line.

*Personal note:* I am intrigued by the last rule. Left to my own devices, I would not naturally follow this rule. I don't think I would have understood this rule from just looking at Ravenna mosaics. I look at my own project in the class; sure enough, it has a background of mostly squarish shapes and the ending triangles.

For more on rules, refer to *Il Mosaico per Immagini*

Marco de Luca

Published by Edizioni Essegi

The listed price in 2009 is 15 euros

*2024 Update:* I poked around the internet but didn't see this book listed anywhere.

### **To create the mosaic:**

The tesserae are pressed into the lime.

Cut, place in lime, cut, place, cut, place, etc. Work up random colors to have in hand, placing...sorting through pieces in-hand, placing, etc.

Work a line at a time, like writing, not at random.

A tessera set more deeply into the design is *sottile*. One more pronounced is *profondo*.

### **Luciana talks about the history of mosaics, especially the use of gold:**

In the early days of floor mosaics, floor backgrounds were white or black. Colors were not prevalent.

The use of the gold background had an important function- a religious meaning. Gold = light= God.

Sometimes backgrounds- green, for example- are considered the subject.

*Personal note:* An example of this is in Classe, about 12 km from Ravenna (bus #4 or 44 in 2008). Classe was once an extremely busy port, now silted in. The city is gone, but Sant' Apollinare survives. It is a fine example of the basilica form, typical of the early Christian churches including the early St Peter's in Rome.

Luciana says, "Gold, when it is a background and seen close up, can dominate." This can make gold the subject (thus violating a rule). When a mosaic will be seen close up, Luciana advises that, for areas thought of as "gold", use gold smalti combined with yellow stone or yellow smalti. This tones down the gold area a bit.

Think about this: old churches had only flame light.

Gold could be ennobling. It might be used highlights, as in hair.

Gold could be a gradation...or a separation of areas...

### **Transfer the mosaic from the lime base to a permanent mortar base**

#### **The first step is to remove the mosaic from the lime base.**

Let the lime dry. As we were told, "That is not possible today." So...

Sprinkle the mosaic surface with marble dust. Fill the crevices, but remove the marble dust from the surface. The marble dust in the crevices creates a barrier between the glue to be applied to the surface and the lime putty.

We use medical-type gauze, an open weave, a larger weave is okay. It adapts to the surface of the mosaic. It should extend beyond the edge of the mosaic by at least 2.5 cm (1").

Wet the gauze before putting onto the mosaic surface. Squeeze it out, stretch it, then lay it on the mosaic. Lay one layer of gauze on the mosaic.

One can use bedsheets, t-shirts, but no material that is a protein (typically animal fur).

Use cotton.

#### **Apply the glue: Use water soluble glue- here are three types:**

1). Rabbit skin and bone glue- best quality is just rabbit.

It dries quickly-in a few hours, a day at most.

To make the glue, let crystals or beads sit in water, then put them in a double boiler till slightly thick but still "runny" consistency—this is very traditional old-fashioned wood glue. To rabbit glue- add glycerin for smoothness and to diminish smells. Use an anti-fungal additive to preserve it.

2.) Easiest glue- flour and water glue- cooked- a papier-mâché paste, it takes up to three days to dry.

### **Glue types continued:**

3.) Wallpaper glue- it is not very strong. Add a bit of PVA (white) glue. PVA (poly-vinyl adhesive) is not water soluble, but it softens in water.

### **We're using rabbit glue:**

Scratch off the top of the banana leaf. *Note:* I have no idea what this refers to. Please write me if you remember anything about a banana leaf.

A natural fibre paintbrush is used to apply the glue. Do not lift it from the surface, and do not stroke with it. Use a circular motion, work it into a bit of a foam.

For a small mosaic, use one layer of cloth.

If the mosaic is 1 meter or larger, lay another gauze on top. Do not add more glue, but work the surfaces together.

Once the gauze has been placed and the glue has been applied and allowed to dry...

### **Remove the mosaic from the lime base.**

Loosen the lime from the board. Use a long spatula to get in behind (below) the lime, running along the base. It will come free.

Grasp the gauze, and peel the mosaic from the lime base. Turn it over, and remove any lime from the back of the mosaic, but not from the gaps. The lime left in the gaps prevents the cement from squishing through the gaps between tesserae.

Once adhered to the cloth and removed in this way, the mosaic can be installed anywhere.

The back surfaces of the tesserae must be clean. This is so that the mosaic will bond with the mortar or other adhesive into which it is set.

Use a knife blade to cut the gauze extending beyond the mosaic.

### **Setting the mosaic**

We set the mosaic onto wood with a frame surrounding it, then add an intermediate surface of tile grout that frames the mosaic.

We will install the mosaic onto a board with a raised frame around it.

Scratch into the surface of the board for better adhesion.

Mix the thinset mortar according to the recipe on the bag.

Cover the back of the cleaned tesserae with the thinset mortar- the correct thickness for this application is determined by the height of the most "profound" tessera. Also apply a thin even layer on the wood (or other base).

Use a spatula to spread, and a small plastering trowel to keep the edge crisp. Thinset is not applied thoroughly to the edge where the mosaic will be set, but almost.

Pick up the mosaic and place it.

Use the flat of your hand to place and set the mosaic. DO NOT push the edges or it will buckle. This process eliminates bubbles and excess cement.

Remove cement from around the edge. This avoids a color difference between the cement and the tile grout or *cocciopesto* to be added at the edge.

Now we have the mosaic permanently set onto the framed board.

*History note:* Using the very traditional mortar used for walls was a 10-year drying process. Now, for speed, one can use thinset mortar.

### **Remove the gauze from the surface.**

I have no notes on this. I remember working outside in the covered work area. It seems that we put a liberal amount of water on the mosaic and scrubbed it vigorously. Then more water, and more scrubbing. The glue loosened quite readily with a few applications. It dissolved in the water, and I seem to remember a thorough final rinse, maybe using the hose.

### **Classic border setting for mosaic fragments: The recipe for cocciopesto.**

Mix up marbles, stone, smalti, anything (inert ingredients), to “kitty litter” size (I assume that this is an international unit of measure), or to the standard grain one wants...

Mix it dry.- For the demo, 1 part = one handful

1 part marble dust

1 part sand- construction sand (these two are the “inert” materials)

1 part Portland cement

Inert materials inhibit cracking.

Add water to the ingredients to a consistency like peanut butter.

Pour around the mosaic that has been set inside a frame.

Water will rise to the surface and form a film.

At just the right time you need to sponge up the water.

“Float” the surface- use a sponge or even a paintbrush.

For speed, use pre-made tile grout, and this is what we did in class, as follows.

### **To complete the display of the mosaic:**

Add material between the edges of the mosaic and the frame of the board.

Mix 2 parts sand with one part tile grout, then water (make fairly “liquidy”), like batter for pancakes.

The inert sand inhibits cracking and gives a surface, especially when floated (worked with water and a sponge or brush at the right time, so that the mortar is slightly washed away and the sand texture made more profound).

Pour in carefully around the edge of the mosaic.

*Crepe* is the Italian name for the cement for around the edges.

I am a bit confused about the exact meaning and use of *cocciopesto* and *crepe*. Please write if you can illuminate me.

### **Reproducing historic mosaics, and photographing historical sites:**

To make a copy, do not copy exactly. Or, copy after having made a payment according to copyright laws.

To copy can be illegal if it is exact, especially in other countries. An exception may be if it is to be published, but clearances are necessary.

When copying old mosaics, one may find that a stone is from a specific country or river, and is not accessible.

Find colors with the same relationship.

The key is the intensity of color, the relationship of the colors, expression and movement.

Mix colors to approximate a given color.

Regarding photos of unpublished archeological sites: one risks having to pay should one publish a photo of the mosaic.

### **Methods for creating a mosaic.**

There are, essentially, two methods for creating a mosaic, direct & indirect, binder notwithstanding.

Direct method mosaics are not grouted.

Indirect method mosaics- grout is an option. For a floor, a table, tiles in a bath- gaps must be filled.

Even antique **mosaics** were not grouted. Floors were often installed and then ground down.

End of 1800's, the indirect method was "invented" to reduce costs.

For mosaics on walls- mixing the two techniques is possible.

Tendency is to use always a grey grout (white will dirty anyway)

### **Considerations for the installation of mosaics.**

There are 3 layers- the mosaic, the binder, the support surface.

1930's- 50's- Portland cement was used, but proved not strong enough.

Then epoxy resins were used, which were strong but toxic.

Newer products are thinset cements adapted for various situations.

Thinset is a refined version of Portland cement with inert ingredients, plus PVA (polyvinyl adhesive) white glues or some latex.

At the studio, we have 2 basic types-thinset-with a 20 minute set time or the slow drying version, which takes about 3 hours. We use the 3-hour cement to work on a direct method mosaic. Spritz the 3-hour cement before applying the drawing to help the water soluble ink transfer.

Regarding the characteristics of other cements- the recommendations are:

Talk to the producing company

Look into colored or grey cements

What is the mix of fine or coarse, and what is the percent of inert materials?

What is the mesh used to sift the materials?

Fast or slow-drying? Horizontal or vertical- the consistency changes?

To make thinset- buy normal cement, add some sand plus lime (hydrated, not hydraulic).

A mosaic may be made or set on a base which may then be installed on a wall.

Indoors- no problems

Outdoors- cement bases, marble, terracloth- the bases are too heavy to set without problems.

The base must be guaranteed not to move.

Hexlite (formerly aerolam) fibre glass with aluminum mesh is sturdy and lightweight. It is a fiberglass surface with a corrugated metal interior between the two faces.

Wedi-board- what I call in the USA "gatorboard"- frame the edge and put an X-brace on back.

Roughen the back surface for adhesion.

### **History/technical note:**

When mosaics are placed on a base of a wall of brick, the surface is built up. On top of the brick are layers formulated in various ways of lime, sand and marble dust.

On our last day, Luciana's daughter Silvia, who is an official guide to the monuments, guided us and spoke about the history on a tour to Sant' Apollinare Nuovo (basilica), San Vitale (church), the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, and the Domus dei Tappeti di Pietra (House of Stone Carpets). Early on the tour, Luciana was with us at the art museum. The walls of the porch around the interior courtyard are filled with modern mosaics, many of them created for a landmark city-sponsored exhibit in 1959. A number of the original cartoons are exhibited next to the finished mosaics. There are also notable more recent works. Luciana worked on several of the mosaics that are on permanent exhibit.



Luciana spoke about a number of mosaic studios and suppliers during the week, and I have added a few:

**Manufacturers** (Checked/Updated 2024):

Mosaici Dona' Murano di Dona' Stefano:

<https://www.mosaicidonamurano.com/>

Their products may be easier to get in the U.S at:

<https://www.dimosaico.com/>

Luciana told a story about how the Dona brothers split, and Mario Dona is in Spilimbergo:

<https://www.donamosaici.it/>

Of course there is the famous Orsoni family, who makes smalti in Venice:

<https://orsoni.com/>

This company is in Ravenna and produces mosaics: La Campagna dell'oro

<https://www.sicis.com/US/en/>

This company sells stone in Italy- Moruzzi, located near Verona. The stone can be ordered with mesh on the back and a paper front for installation by others.

<https://www.moruzzi.com/>

The same folks that sell Orsoni products in the U.S. as mosaicsmalti.com have 3 other businesses, Wits End Mosaics, Make It Mosaics and Smalti.com Mexican, all available at the same website. Luciana spoke highly of the Mexican producers.

<https://mosaicmalti.com/>

The school in Ravenna:

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Luciana Notturmi, founder and teacher

What a fine class it was. My classmates were Betsy and Diana from the USA, Helle and Susan from Denmark, Katherine from Canada, Tina from Australia, and Michele from Denmark (I believe) by way of Chile (I think).

## Lime Putty

I have looked onto making lime putty for use at home in Eugene, Oregon, USA.

The original making of lime putty in the Roman manner involved using calcium oxide. It generates tremendous heat, and then, it is recommended, set aside where it can't easily oxidize for several months, and 3 years would be even better. The Romans would bury it, and a Roman might have been happy to inherit a stash of lime putty. This may be true lime putty.

I visited a mason's supply store in Eugene and they do not carry lime putty, or raw calcium oxide. At my local farm supply store, I bought a bag of calcium hydroxide.

From what limited information I could find, it may be that the calcium hydroxide is calcium oxide that has been slaked, the step when it is combined with water, the step where great heat is generated and where one would want to understand the correct steps to be followed.

The calcium hydroxide I bought is lime that is used on fields. I mixed it up with water and came up with a creamy consistency. The next day I mixed some more of it drier than the first batch, let it sit for a day (to absorb more of the water), and it made a stiff mix, what I remember from our class. Perhaps it dries out more quickly. I haven't had the chance to use it yet. (2024 update: Though I have made a number of mosaics, I still haven't tried this material with the easel method of construction- I just do it at the worktable).

There were three notebook items of my own that I did not understand. I noted them earlier, but I thought I would re-state them here in case anyone reading this can enlighten me:

Sculpey (DAS in Italia) may be used as a substitute for what material in the mosaic process? From my notes, it may be as a substitute for the lime base, or it may be something that can be used as a fourth type of "glue" to help with the transfer of the mosaic from the lime to a permanent setting. I'm not sure.

I'm not sure of the precise meaning of *cocciopesto* and *creppe*. I believe that *cocciopesto* is very traditional and *creppe* has to do with the more modern thinset materials.

"Scratch off the top of the banana leaf." I have no idea what this was about. It was in with my notes about rabbit glue.

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